

Written Testimony and Supplemental Materials

Of

Stanley Willner

Before

Committee on Veterans Affairs

U.S. House of Representatives

HR 23

Belated thank you to the Merchant Marines of World War II Act of 2007

April 18, 2007

Disclosure

Mr. Willner is not the recipient of any Federal grant nor does he have or had a contract, relevant or otherwise to the subject matter of his testimony, with the U.S. Government within the past two years. He is a private citizen with no official federal or state association, financial or otherwise.

CURRICULUM VITAE

Stanley Willner

Note: Personally Identifiable Information (PII) has been redacted in accordance with OMB Memorandum M-06-15, "Safeguarding Personally Identifiable Information."

YOB:	1920
Citizenship:	U.S.
Veteran Status:	100 percent disabled veteran, POW
Father:	Deceased.
Mother:	Deceased.
1938	High School Graduation
1938	Appointed Deck Cadet to the U.S. Maritime Service by Senator Harry F. Byrd (deceased), Virginia.
1941	Graduated as Deck Officer and Third Mate with a commission as Ensign in the U.S. Naval Reserve.
1942	Married.
1942	Third Mate on the Excaliber, a passenger ship. (I was in Lisbon, Portugal when the Japanese Attacked Pearl Harbor.)
1942	Attempted to enlist. Rejected and sent to the M.S. Sawokla, an Army Transport, headed for Bahrain, Iraq with supplies for standing up an Army Base.
1942	November. M.S. Sawokla sunk by the German Raider, Michel. Severely wounded. Prisoner of War, Third Reich.
	Subsequently, turned over to the Japanese Imperial Army and worked on the infamous Bridge over the River Kwai.
1943	Declared dead by the Navy Department. (Copy of letter attached.)
1945	Liberated. Returned to the United States, weighed about 75 – 80 pounds and had to make my own recovery.
1945 – 1982	Businessman. Retired in 1982.
1987	Granted Veteran's status.
1982 – Present	Retired.
Web Site:	www.angelstation.com/swillner

Written Testimony
Of
Stanley Willner

Thank you Mr. Chairman and members of the Committee for Veterans' Affairs.

My name is Stanley Willner. I am the first official Merchant Marine veteran of World War II. I was captured by the German Navy and turned over to the Imperial Japanese Army occupation forces in Singapore. I remained a prisoner for more than three years and three months.

After graduating from high school in 1938, I received an appointment to the U.S. Maritime Service from the late Senator Harry F. Byrd of Virginia.

I spent three years as a Merchant Marine cadet. On August 21, 1941 I graduated to Deck Officer and third mate with a commission of Ensign in the U.S. Naval Reserve.

I served as Third Mate on the Excaliber, one of the Four Aces passenger ships in the Mediterranean. When Japan attacked Pearl Harbor, I was in Lisbon, Portugal.

After returning, I immediately went to the Naval Board in New York City to enlist. I was rejected and sent to serve on M. S. Sawokla, an Army Transport ship.

In the midst of all this activity, I met and married my wife of sixty five years, Carol. But before we had a chance to take our honeymoon, the Sawokla set sail for a three month deployment to India and the Persian Gulf with supplies to stand up an Army Base in Bahrain, Iraq.

Upon my return, I was to be promoted to Lt. J.G. or full Lt. in the U.S. Navy Reserve. Most importantly, my new wife and I would take our honeymoon.

On November 1942, the Sawokla, steaming south of Madagascar, was stalked, fired upon, torpedoed and sunk by the German Raider, Michel (Mik-el). The Michel was deceptively disguised as a merchant vessel but equipped with a lethal arsenal. The German Raider fleet was as effective as the U-Boats in sinking Allied supply vessels.

The Michel's log shows that the Sawokla sunk almost immediately. I was the Officer on watch with a staff of eight lookouts. I woke up in the water, badly wounded and clinging to a piece of wreckage. About three hours later the Michel picked me up. I remained in the sick bay for about three months. I was given excellent medical treatment.

The next day, the Michel sent out its scout plane and torpedo boat to pick up the wreckage so there would be no trace of the Sawokla. That action resulted in a letter from the Navy Department declaring me dead. (Exhibit 1)

Thirty seamen and nine members of the Naval Armed Guard survived the attack. We were now captives of the Third Reich.

The Michel sank more ships while I was on board. One ship had one survivor, the other had thirteen.

The Japanese would not let the Michel out of the Pacific blockade for its return to Germany. Low on food and fuel, the Michel docked in Singapore and turned over its prisoners to the Japanese.

The Michel's doctor had given me a medical letter to give to the Japanese. The Japanese sergeant took the letter, tore it up and hit me with his rifle butt. Hard, un-Godly times were just ahead.

We were billeted in Changi Jail which was built to hold about six hundred criminals. The Japanese had herded anywhere from 10,000 to 15,000 prisoners, including women and children, within its walls.

Initially, we lived in huts outside the main building, while we worked at the docks.

My clothes were in shreds from the Michel's attack. I had kicked my shoes off in the water. I would live in these tattered rags, barefoot for over three years. The only other clothing I received was when an Australian serviceman gave me a piece of cloth that I used as a loin cloth.

The Allied POW's who had surrendered in Singapore still had clothes and mess kits. All I had was a tin can for water, which I used for over three years.

For the remainder of my captivity, I did not shave, brush my teeth or cut my hair or receive any medicine or enough food to remain healthy and fit.

As if it could not get worse, it did. The Japanese sent us up country into Burma and Siam (Thailand) to build the Burma-Siam Railroad, known as Death's Railway. Its path crossed over the River Kwai¹.

In Singapore we were crammed into small railroad cars. We could not sit, but were packed in standing position, barely able to move at all. There was no ventilation. Several of the men had dysentery. Others had little choice but to urinate and defecate on themselves. The railroad car quickly began to smell like a sewer barge. The stink would not wash off. Every nine or ten hours the train would stop to take on coal and water. We were let out for about fifteen minutes a day over the course of five days.

On arrival, we were marched twenty miles a day for six straight days to get to the location of the railroad.

Before my capture, the U.S.S. Houston and the 131st Battalion, known as the Lost Battalion went missing. I caught up with some of the survivors on Death's Railway. For some reason, only a limited number of Americans were sent up country by the Japanese.

While the movie, the Bridge on the River Kwai made this episode in history known to many, it did not reveal the true brutality of the Japanese and the suffering of officers and enlisted men, who starving and diseased, built a railroad through the jungle on virtually no food and one cup of water a day. We were worked from dark to dark. More than 100,000 human lives were sacrificed. Some counts are as high as 300,000 and include native women and children.

Two indelible memories of extreme brutality that have haunted me in nightmares come to mind. A British soldier who had lost an arm and a leg was responsible for heating the Japanese officers bath water in a 50 gallon drum. One night, returning from a work

¹ Historically, the bridges spanned the Mae Klong river. Death's Railway followed the Kwae Noi Valley. The Pierre Boulle novel and the David Lean movie incorrectly referenced the River Kwai (Kwae noi – little tributary), but I have continued to use it as a common reference for easier communication.

party, we heard a great commotion in the camp. We were made to line up while the water in the drum was brought to a full boil. The Japanese picked up the British amputee and tossed him into the boiling water. I can still hear his screams to this very day.

The second was an outbreak of Cholera. We were given only one cup of boiled water a day. The scathing tropical heat took its toll on us. Some were so desperate for a drink of water, they would drink from the River Kwai. The natives living up river, used the river for everything, including human waste disposal. Many thousands contracted Cholera and died.

I was assigned to a squad to collect the victims in our camp who were dead or near death and burn them. If we refused, the Japanese would shoot you on the spot and add you to the pile. Such a situation was impossible to comprehend then as it is now. No explanation is suitable. And, no amount of years makes it any less horrible for me.

The Railroad was completed in about two years. Those who survived were sent back to Singapore. I was sick with beri-beri, dysentery, malaria, pellagra, scurvy and ringworm. All kinds of sores covered my body. Out of the original 525 plus men who went up country with me, only 116 returned.

When we were liberated all Allied prisoners in the Far East and Murmansk were flown from Singapore etc. to the 142nd Army Hospital in Karachi, India, which is now Pakistan.

I was twenty five years old, weighed seventy-four pounds and infected with every disease imaginable. The doctors told me that I would be the luckiest man alive if I lived to be fifty years old. The Army medical care was nearly the last time as a Merchant Marine that I received any U.S. Government benefits for my service.

The doctors and nurses in the 142nd cried when they saw us. They had never seen human beings in such bad shape. In fact, the first night we slept on the floor not wanting to mess up the white hospital sheets.



From India on our trip back to the States, the Merchant Seamen were soon forgotten. They received no Government benefits until 1987 when they were awarded veteran's status. Our captors and our fellow prisoners treated us as military prisoners and made no distinction in our service when they dished out the brutality. Yet our own government would see us as undeserving and would render us invisible in the post war years.

The other POWs were issued new uniforms and given spending money. The Mariners received only one shirt and one pair of pants, plus a pair of shoes. I was unable to wear the shoes. After a month in the hospital we were flown back to the States.

The plane stopped in Gander, Newfoundland. A female worker asked me if I wanted some fresh milk. I drank the milk and she charged me \$2.00 because I was not in uniform. I had no money.

The plane landed in a military airport outside of Washington, D.C. The military men were met with Honor Guards. The Mariners were left on their own. I was lucky. My wife came to take me home.

I was unable to adjust. The Government gave me one month's pay of \$250.00. I was admitted to the Marine Hospital for two weeks. I was told I was fit for duty and was discharged. This was the very last Government benefit I received until 1988, four decades later.

I had a large ringworm on my stomach. As the result of being hit with rifle butts in the back several times, I eventually had to have back surgery. For nearly a year I suffered with malaria. Walking around I would just pass out. I suffered continuous nightmares. I was lucky to have my family taking care of me.

A British doctor who took care of us in the camps would send me medicine for the jungle rot on my chest. It took two years of dental work to save my teeth. The Government dentist wanted to pull them out. My family paid for the civilian dentist.

It is well known today after Korea and Viet Nam that war veterans and especially POWs have huge psychological issues to overcome. I had to use civilian doctors at my own expense. It was well over a year and half before I could return to work.

I tried working for the Maritime Commission pricing war surplus ships for sale to foreign countries. The work required travel and I was unable to travel and had to resign.

My wife and I took over a family business that brought us some success over the years. But, I have never stopped being a prisoner.

I attended two River Kwai reunions with Dennis Roland (deceased), my shipmate and POW buddy. I was the only Allied POW who refused to walk across the bridge with our former Japanese captors. In the cemetery before the walk, memories of all those who were sacrificed for the Japanese railroad came flooding back. I could forgive, but I refused to forget.

The importance of the Merchant Marine effort in the successful outcome of World War II cannot be overstated. Without the Merchant Marines, the logistical arm of the war effort would have collapsed. The steady flow of supplies at perilous and great risk by Merchant seaman deserves recognition by the same Government that depended so heavily upon them.

General Douglas McArthur

"They sharded the heaviest fire—They have suffered in bloodshed and death—They have contributed tremendously to our success. I hold no branch in higher esteem then the Merchant Marine Services."

President Harry Truman

“To you who answered the call of your country and served in the Merchant Marine to bring about the total defeat of the enemy, I extend the heartfelt thanks of the Nation.”

During and after World War II, members of the U.S. Merchant Marine were denied well deserved benefits. In 1944, President Roosevelt signed the G.I. Bill. He said, “I trust Congress will soon provide similar opportunities to members of the Merchant Marine who risked their lives time and again during the War for the welfare of their country.” The U.S. Merchant Marine and the U.S. Maritime Service were agencies of the United States Government.

My best friend and fellow POW, Dennis Roland, the 2nd Officer on the Sawokla, died on December 17, 1984 at the age of 76 with leukemia. Roland stayed in the Navy retiring as a Lieutenant Commander. When Roland passed away, I took his place in the fight for Merchant Marine veteran status.

The Air Force was sued on behalf of the Merchant Marine survivors by Joan McAvoy. The case is known as Plaintiffs—Ed Schumacher, Willner, and Lester Reid, vs. Aldridge. Aldridge was the Secretary of the Air Force at the time.

Federal Judge Louis Oberdofrer conferred veteran’s status in his Summary Judgment in 1987 – forty two years after the end of World War II. An adult lifetime. By this time both Schumacher and Reid were deceased. I was the first Merchant Mariner to be called a World War II veteran.

It is my life long desire to see those who willingly risked life and limb patriotically in support of the war effort, in the midst of combat, to receive not only the monetary recognition but the recognition of a country they made strong and whole all these years.

Remember that when a merchant ship was sunk, the mariner’s pay was stopped. This token of thanks will help bring the recognition so well deserved.

The British, Dutch and German Merchant Mariners were always considered veterans by their country. Surviving crew members of the Michel were even surprised to learn years later that their American captives were not considered veterans for the service given.

Thank you for this opportunity to testify and present my life history.

Exhibit 1 – Notification of My Death

In reply address to the signer of this letter, but Bureau of Naval Personnel, Navy Department, Washington, D. C. Refer to No.

Pers-3659C-JMM
92096

NAVY DEPARTMENT
BUREAU OF NAVAL PERSONNEL
WASHINGTON, D. C.

FEB 27 1943

From: The Chief of Naval Personnel.
To: The Secretary of the Navy.
Subject: Cancellation of appointment in the case of
Mr. Stanley WILLNER as Ensign, D-M, USNR,
dated August 21, 1942.

1. It is requested that the appointment in the case of the above subject applicant be cancelled for the following reason:

Applicant is deceased. .

Navy Reserve	
Register Section	
1	K
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C	

8-11-42
3/10

Randall Jacobs
The Chief of Naval Personnel.

A. P. Lawton

By direction.

Finished USNR Register File

Finished William File

Copy to: DNOP-New York, New York
Pers 3101

rd. CON File

Approved: FEB 27 1943
Frank Knox
Secretary of the Navy.